

Walking for Wellbeing

Walking handbook

Introduction

If you're new to walking, this handbook gives advice about various aspects of countryside walking, from planning for your walk, packing, warming up, enjoying your walk and taking care of yourself afterward.

Planning

If you're off for a two-mile jaunt around the local park, planning is not always necessary. If you're aiming for seven miles with a stop for lunch at a nice spot and maybe a pint toward the end, properly planning a walk can a world of difference.

Where to start

The first thing you should decide is how far you want to go. It is reasonable to expect a pace of around two miles an hour, including the occasional break or stop enjoy a view.

How do you decide what distance you want to cover? If you have not walked for a while, it is best to start small and work your way up.

- *Two miles* are easy to cover, and even the littlest of legs can manage an amble across a few fields or around a park for an hour.
- *Three or four miles* are a bit more challenging, but simple for anyone who has been walking regularly for a few weeks.
- *Five or six miles* are a good workout for someone who walks regularly.
- *Seven to ten or more miles* are a challenge for many seasoned walkers, and a good target to cover on a day out walking.

Time

A reasonable speed for countryside walking is two to three miles an hour. Using this and your expectation for the distance you want to walk, you can work out how long you will be out. This can be important, especially in late autumn through to early spring when the sun sets much earlier than during the summer.

You may also want to factor in a number of rest stops – say ten minutes each – and a break for lunch if you're taking it – half an hour to an hour is a sensible estimate.

Of course, your general speed will affect your estimate. If you're charging across the countryside without taking breaks, you'll take less time. If you're ambling along checking out every sign of wildlife you see, you'll take more time.

It is not impossible to find your way in the dusk or even in the dark, but without preparation and practice you will find it tough, so make sure you are back within range of home or transport before sunset.

With that in mind, walking after dark can be magnificent. A clear night sky can be a beautiful sight away from the orange glow of streetlights, especially without a glowing moon. On and around a full moon, there is plenty of light to find your way by. Much of the country's wildlife is active at night, and you may hear owls hooting, foxes barking or badgers at play.

Terrain

You've decided how far you want to walk and how long you want to spend doing it; now to decide where you want to go. If you're planning an urban walk, you might want to stay away from busy roads and stick to well-worn pathways. For a long country walk, you might want to combine the challenging views of a few hills with some forest for cover and wildlife.

If you've been to the area you plan to walk before, you will know for what terrain you're facing. If your target is virgin territory, you'll want a map to show you what you'll encounter.

Map

Many local walks are signposted and their well-worn tracks steer you around without the need for guidance. The further away you get from civilisation, the less well marked the paths are, and a good map is essential for wandering away from your rural comfort zone.

Fortunately, the standard for cartography in the UK is incredibly high. Ordnance Survey, who has been mapping our island since 1747, produces a wonderful series of maps in the Explorer series that are perfect for walkers. The scale of 1:25,000 – 4cm to 1km or 2½ inches to 1 mile is ideal to give an overview of an area while providing enough detail to fill in the blanks when you're standing in a field wondering where the heck you need to go.

“...the Explorer series is ideal to fill in the blanks when you're wondering where the heck you need to go...”

An OS map is by no means ideal; anyone who has tried to open and close one in the rain on a windy hillside will attest to that. One trick is to scan and print only the section you need and keep that in a clear plastic folder. Another is to fold the map to show the area you'll be walking and keep the map itself inside a sealed plastic document wallet.

There are so many benefits of carrying an OS map while walking; here are just a few of them:

- Footpaths, bridleways and rights of way are clearly marked so if your way is not obvious, your map should show you where to go. Of course, this is dependent on being sure where you are in the first place!
- Contour lines indicate where you will be going uphill or downhill. Hill walking uses different muscles and increases your workout, so for those new to walking it's best to stick to gentle slopes. Many hills are well worth the effort though; the view from the top can be simply breathtaking.
- Woods and waterways are indicated clearly, giving you targets for somewhere to take cover from the sun or stop for lunch.
- Built-up areas and pubs are visible, giving you options for a “comfort break” or a relaxing pint on your way around.

There are things a map cannot show you, such as the quality of the ground underfoot or whether a marked footpath is clear. You'll only find out these things along the way, but a good map can help you be prepared and plan your route effectively.

Weather

The weather in the UK is at best fickle and at worst fierce. Yes, we have our moments of beautiful sunshine and occasional hints of heat wave, but usually we describe the weather as “changeable”.

“Whatever the conditions, it's important not to be put off if the weather isn't ideal”.

It is important to plan your walk around the approaching weather. Protecting yourself from the sun, the rain or the cold is important for your comfort and enjoyment. Some like it hot, some prefer a good breeze; others will walk in any weather. Most would agree that getting soaked through is a dreadful experience when you are not carrying good waterproofs.

There are many good sources of reliable short-term weather forecasts. Almost all media carry some form of weather reporting – newspaper, radio, television and internet are all great sources. It is worth following the weather for a day or two before your walk so you're aware of the changing situation.

If you're susceptible to sunburn, make sure you always have some suitable lotion available to protect yourself. On particularly sunny days – even in winter – a hat or scarf that covers your neck is essential.

Whatever the conditions, it is important not to be put off if the weather isn't ideal. A walk on an overcast day can be as fulfilling as one during fair weather.

Packing

Deciding what you take with you on your walks is a fine balancing act. You want to take enough gear and supplies to keep you comfortable in all eventualities, but not so much that you're lugging too many extra kilos and your back aches half way around. There are essential items and luxuries many people like to take. Here are a few to get you started.

Suitable bag

Many bags that are suitable for casual use such as over-the-shoulder bags or fashion items may be fine for short walks or for carrying lighter loads, but are not suited to heavier loads or long distances. Investing in a good rucksack is a great idea as they're not just useful for walking – they're great as carry-on luggage or overnight journeys too.

Sporting goods stores usually provide a limited range of outdoor goods at reasonable prices, and rucksacks are usually available here. Outdoor gear suppliers often have a fantastic range of bags, ranging from small child packs to huge hiking rucksacks.

Good rucksacks offer many advantages. Multiple pouches and pockets help you organise your gear so you always know where everything is. Strong straps and zips are essential to tolerate the wear and tear a well-used pack will experience. A waterproof or water-resistant bag offers peace of mind when the weather turns.

Most regular walkers have had their fair share of poorly constructed bags before settling on a faithful companion. A little research on the internet or advice from friends can show you the way.

Food

Even if your walk is just a few miles long, taking something to eat can really help pep you up. From a piece of fruit to a full-blown picnic with all the trimmings, eating outdoors can be very gratifying, especially if there is a good view to appreciate.

How much food you take is dependent on the duration of your walk. Assuming you're eating breakfast before you start out, you can take a couple of simple snacks – like fruit – to eat after an hour or so walking, and for longer walks it's nice to pack a lunch to enjoy at a nice spot on the way around.

- Try to ensure the food you take is healthy. Exercise for the body is one of the many positive effects of walking, and eating healthy foods can help you squeeze the maximum benefit out of the occasion.
- Naturally, achieving a goal can be cause for celebration, so take a treat along to celebrate when you get to the top of that hill or pass five miles for the first time.
- Fruit will give you a useful energy boost. A banana soon after setting out prepares the body for the exertion ahead.
- Sandwiches are perfect for walks. Indulge yourself with a filling or bread you like but don't often have.

- It takes around 45 minutes of steady walking to burn off the calories in a packet of crisps, so choose your munchies wisely. Dried fruit chips are a great substitute.
- Don't take anything that will ruin the contents of your rucksack in the event of a leak. Gear will dry if water leaks but if oil or sauce gets all over your pack and favourite emergency sweater, it may be impossible to clean up.

Properly packing your food is essential to guarantee it gets to its destination in one piece. Bananas for example are soft and require a position towards the top of your pack to prevent them being squashed. Pack sandwiches and other soft items in sealed lunch boxes to protect them and give more flexibility in packing them.

Water

It is important to take on liquid and maintain hydration to make certain the body is working at its best, so a steady supply of water is essential on anything other than a short walk. A 750 ml or 1 litre plastic water bottle is perfect for this, although do not keep them for more than a week as they begin to harbour bacteria.

In outdoor goods stores you can buy 1-litre aluminium bottles that are perfect for carrying your water. They are rugged and seal well, and carry enough water to keep you going for up to ten miles. These are easy to keep clean and are essential gear for anyone committed to walking as part of his or her lifestyle.

It is useful to get into the habit of taking on water regularly, especially in the summer; it is almost as important during the other seasons too. During exercise, you use up your water reserves whether it's hot outside or not, so try to think about drinking a little every time you approach a stile or turn during your walk. You will soon come to learn the signals your body gives you when you need to take on more liquid.

It is reasonable to expect that if you're putting water in, you'll need to let water out again. This is the great outdoors, so be prepared and don't be afraid of getting back to nature when nature calls.

Binoculars and cameras

Whether recording a wonderful view or scanning the other side of a field for your way forward, these pieces of optical kit quickly become essential items once you've used them a few times.

A small, compact pair of binoculars is very handy for checking your route and a scan of the horizon can help put your map into perspective. Larger, heavier binoculars are great for spotting wildlife – a Buzzard or Red Kite up-close through binoculars is one of British nature's most exhilarating sights.

Many modern cameras are well suited to the outdoors. Taking photos of memorable views or wildlife that catches your attention is a lovely way of documenting your walks and helps you track your progress. Many mobile phone cameras take a good shot, especially those from 2008 onward.

Essential items

Many experienced walkers pack their own “must-have” gear. Here is a list of a few items that many think are indispensable.

- Compass/GPS - a simple compass can help you match your direction to your map and surroundings, while a GPS device will tell you exactly where you are at any given time. GPS are also handy for tracking statistics such as distance covered, average walking speed etc.
- Mobile phone - while you may not always get a signal out in the middle of nowhere, it is always worth having your phone with you in case you need to make contact with civilisation.
- Whistle - in case of absolute emergency, a whistle can attract the attention of passers-by.
- A small pair of secateurs or pruning shears - these can be incredibly useful when faced with thick brambles covering your only exit.
- Waterproofs - the weather can change at the drop of a hat so ensure a light, simple waterproof jacket is always handy.
- Tissues or wet wipes - these are so valuable it is impossible to list all their benefits, but many don't leave home without them.
- A pen - it is best to make notes or draw a diversion on a map while out walking, when it is clear in your mind.
- Plastic bag - whether it is for collecting rubbish or taking care of a muddy pair of boots, a good plastic bag or two will be invaluable. You can also use them to keep your bottom dry when taking a break.

Shoes

A good pair of shoes is essential for walking any reasonable distance across the countryside. While a pair of comfortable trainers is fine for a couple of urban miles, walking shoes or boots offer resistance to everything the outdoors can throw at them. Water, mud, uncomfortable surfaces or potholes are all more bearable with a good pair of boots, so they should be waterproof, sturdy and offer ankle support.

This is another of those items where research and experience helps. Check out reviews on the internet, ask friends for recommendations, and be prepared to wear out one or two pairs of boots before you settle on a design that suits you.

Extra weight

Carrying extra weight is a great way to increase the workout you get from walking. An extra one- or two-litre bottle of water or a few tins of food creatively packed will help you keep fit and build stamina. It is probably best not to tell your friends you're taking your soup for a walk, though.

Walking

Walking is all about putting one foot in front of the other, right? Fundamentally, that's what it is all about, but there can be a little more to it than that.

Warming up

As with any exercise, warming-up helps prepare muscles and tendons for the walk ahead. You can use a regular routine with a few basic exercises that can drastically reduce your chances of strain or injury.

It is handy to have some support when doing these exercises. A post, bench or gate is entirely suitable. When stretching, don't 'bounce' or repeatedly stretch the muscles and tendons, as you can do more harm than good.

Your first task is to walk at a leisurely pace for the first five or ten minutes of your journey. This gently wakes up all the muscles and prepares them for the stretching and manipulation you're about to give them.

1. Leg stretch 1. Stand with your feet together. Take a step forward with your right leg; keep your left leg straight and bend your right knee until you feel resistance. Hold this position for 15-30 seconds, noting the feeling in different parts of your legs. Return to the standing position and repeat the exercise with the left leg forward.
2. Leg stretch 2. Stand again with your feet together. While supporting yourself, transfer your weight onto your left foot, bring your right foot up to your buttocks and hold it in your hand. Pull the toes gently toward your back until you feel the strain, and hold for 15-30 seconds, then repeat with your other leg.
3. Leg stretch 3. Using a kerb, fence or gate, stand with your toes on the edge and your heels hanging over the edge. Transfer your weight to your right foot, allowing your ankle to drop lower than your toes until you feel resistance. Hold for 15-30 seconds, and then repeat on the other side.
4. General leg stretching. Swing each leg back and forward 10-15 times, as close to their range as is comfortable. Stretch each leg out to the side a similar number of times as well. This part of your warm-up will likely make you look a bit bonkers.
5. Arm stretches. Swing each arm around a few times, and then push them back and forth to get those muscles working.
6. Hip twists. With your arms out to the side, rotate your upper body on your hips, first one way then the other. Repeat 10-15 times.
7. Neck mobility. Roll your head around your shoulders clockwise for 5-10 turns, and then repeat in the anti-clockwise direction.
8. Finally, stretch like a cat. Start at one end of your body – your fingers or your toes – and gradually stretch every part of your body until you reach the other end.

Now you've planned and packed, prepared and warmed-up, it is time to get walking.

Technique

When you first start out walking, you will want to take it steady, especially if you haven't been particularly active recently. Your body needs time and practice before it gets used to the work you're doing, and occasionally it will give you feedback to indicate how you're doing. This feedback is usually in the form of aches and strains, although occasionally it is more subtle.

It is definitely worth listening out for this feedback. Maybe you're pushing yourself too hard, or your walking technique is slightly askew. One helpful routine to get into is to focus specifically on each footfall for the first two hundred or so steps. Concentrate on what your legs are doing and see whether your motion is symmetrical.

If you notice a repetitive twinge, ache or strain after every walk, it may be worth talking to your doctor, who may refer you to a physiotherapist. This is especially important if you're using walking as your main form of exercise, or you're using it to help level-out the symptoms of depression; the slightest recurring injury can really dampen your enthusiasm.

Work harder

If you want to increase your workload, drive your arms and take more steps instead of increasing your stride. You can alternate walking slightly faster with your normal pace to work harder and give yourself a chance to recover.

We have already mentioned carrying extra weight – load up on water or cans of food and increase the weight of your pack to make your body work harder.

If you can, aim to include more hills in your walks. Going up and down hills uses different muscles and increases your workout.

Poles

Adding a single walking pole or stick to your repertoire can be very handy. Not only are they useful for moving thistles, nettles and brambles out of your path, they become an extra support when crossing stiles or uneven ground. Using one or two walking poles increases the amount of work your body does, ultimately making you fitter and increasing your stamina.

If you only use one pole, it can be useful if you alternate which hand you carry it in. Using it in your weaker hand may feel odd at first, but it ensures each side of your body is doing a similar amount of work and will become second nature in no time.

Warming down

Spend the last ten minutes of your walk slowing down. This helps your body and mind settle down. You can repeat the warm-up exercises gently to warm-down your body when you finally stop.

Aftercare

When you return home, it is nice to have a routine that helps you recover from your hard work. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Clear-up your gear

Although you may not feel like doing so when you get home, you should get rid of all the rubbish from your pack, rinse your water bottles and get rid of any mud on your boots. Spending ten minutes sorting your gear out gives you peace of mind and stops it becoming a chore you can put off “until later”.

Unwind

A nice bath or shower can help your body and mind unwind after a walk. Nice hot water can be an indulgence for your muscles after all that effort, and a half-hour soak in the tub lets your mind relax too.

Moisturise

It is always nice to moisturise your feet after a walk; working the cream in can be like a mini-massage which will do wonders for aching feet. If you’ve caught the sun slightly, moisturising can help keep your skin in prime condition.

Conclusion

This handbook will help you prepare for your walks and get the most out of the countryside. Even if you’re a perfectly formed walking machine, we hope this guide was of use to you, and ask that you help us improve it. Much of the guidance here is borne of personal experience and your knowledge could help, so send us your own tips and observations to noel@walkingforwellbeing.org.uk

A note from the author

All the information in this leaflet is a reflection on what has been learned during walks of between three and ten miles from the January to July 2009. It may seem like a lot to take in, and there is so much more to say, but much of the joy of walking stems from making such discoveries yourself.

There is one more piece of wisdom I would like to pass on – the Countryside Code. Even though it sounds like it is straight from an Enid Blyton novel - it is simple and incredibly cliché - it encompasses exactly what our outlook on the countryside should be to preserve it for those who follow us through the wilderness:

“Take only photographs, leave only footprints”